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WHY DO FILIPINOS LOVE TO PERFORM LUCK TRADITIONS?

By **REOJENEE DELA CUADRA**

Art by JANINA VALDEZ

From knocking on wood to eating grapes every New Year's Eve, Filipinos have always relied on small rituals to bend fate in their favor.

Filipinos have a long list of rituals they love performing on every occasion, from holidays, contests, and even major exams. New Year's Eve is perhaps the most ceremonial: jumping to grow taller, blowing a *torotot* to ward off evil spirits, or even jiggling coins in our pockets to attract financial abundance.

For the last few years, Gen Z and millennials have engaged in a new, viral TikTok trend: a single person ready for romance crouches under the table and, when the clock strikes, gobbles down a dozen grapes in one minute.

Contrary to popular belief, this is not limited to romantic relationships. It traces back to Spanish culture, where it is known as *las doce uvas de la suerte* or "the 12 lucky grapes." A group of merchants from Alicante in Eastern Spain established this practice on New Year's Day as a symbol of good luck in the province. However, as reported by food writer Jeff Koehler, newspaper clippings from the 1880s indicate that the habit originated from Madrid's bourgeoisie imitating the French New Year's Eve custom of consuming grapes and champagne.

Regardless of its true origin, people have continued to take part in this practice to bring luck by their side, as the 12 grapes equal the months in a year. Gen Z has interpreted this custom into a love ritual today, and although we know that there is no real correlation between grapes and success, many people still willingly participate.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RITUALS

Rituals are usually performed in times of uncertainty, like board exams, seasonal celebrations, or even during contests. Aside from the fact that these beliefs are harmless to do, they can help reduce anxiety even if the ritual itself has no discernible effect on the result. "Although the rational brain knows these actions do not change the physical world, the emotional brain finds relief in doing them," cognitive behavioral therapist Tom Holland-Pearse told **Young STAR**. "And because the action reduces anxiety, even just a little, the behavior becomes reinforced." At its core, superstitions and rituals are a survival strategy that the brain uses to feel more in control in times of uncertainty. Since predictability is essential for survival, our brains evolved to function as pattern-seeking mechanisms. Dr. Raffaello Antonino, a counselling psychologist and the founder of Therapy Central, explained, "If something good happened after we did a particular thing, we naturally link the two together. Do it enough times and that connection starts to feel like the truth."

Research published in the journal *Psychological Science* revealed that common actions and famous expressions, such as saying "Break a leg" or crossing your fingers, improve performance in certain tasks. Believing in superstitions and performing rituals became our reassurance in outcomes that have no certainty of success. We feel more confident that everything will work out as planned. Rather than having to deal with possible misfortune, a small action like knocking on wood is a cheaper price to pay. Personal ritualistic beliefs, such as carrying a lucky charm or sliding a coin in your shoes before a nerve-wracking performance, have an appeal to most because of their low cost.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES AND WAY OF LIFE

Aside from the psychology behind rituals and superstitions, these traditions have long lived because of our rich cultural history. Our interactions with Southeast Asian countries have led to the blending of pre-Hispanic faiths like Hinduism, Sikhism, and Jainism of India, as well as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism of China. When the Spaniards came and introduced Christianity, Filipinos, in some way, were able to combine Christian and pre-Hispanic practices.

"Filipinos are into following rituals because it has always been their way of life since the pre-Hispanic period," said Professor Melanie Turingan, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Letters at the University of Santo Tomas. "The tradition has been passed on both orally and in practice. Although there may have been some changes or innovations, these are innately found in the consciousness of every Filipino."

Even before, our indigenous ancestors had secular activities and religious rituals prepared for every occasion. In the book *Culture and Customs of the Philippines* by Paul A. Rodell, the earliest Spanish priest chroniclers wrote that the *Tagalogs* believed in *Bathala* as their principal god. Since this supreme god was distant and unreachable, Filipinos offered prayers and sacrifices to lesser, complementary deities to gain immediate blessings. The *anitos* were the most prevalent, as they were believed to be the spirits of our ancestors who were supplicated for assistance in difficult times. For Non-Christian Filipinos, rituals formed the core of religious beliefs; they believed that ceremonies guided by *shamans* kept harvest plentiful and health under check.

Today, superstitions and rituals can boost people's self-esteem and motivate them to strive harder and set greater goals for themselves by evoking sentiments of good fortune. In challenging times, it becomes our comfort and coping mechanism for dealing with uncontrollable circumstances. At the end of the day, there is no harm in trying these rituals.

With the new year just around the corner, you might find a family member, friend, or yourself devouring a dozen grapes under the table. Be careful, though, since you might decrease your chances of an organic encounter if you choke. Whether these rituals may work or not, believing in them is one thing; having confidence in your capabilities is another.

HANDMADE LABOR OF LOVE

By **JONAH LLAVE**

Art by JASMINE CABRILES

To my Papa, for manually cracking and meticulously picking apart crabs for me, the ultimate handmade labor of love.

Growing up in a family of OFWs meant twice the celebrations. We came up with all sorts of excuses to gather and share a meal, savoring every moment we had together before being apart once again. In these tiny moments where we were blessed to be whole, my family never shied away from spending a little more on food. We were never really affectionate or vocal with our love, but food has always been the safest language of love we all could agree on. From my Papa's kilos upon kilos of chocolate *pasalubong* to appease my sweet tooth to my *kuya*'s love letters in the form of tea boxes that I mentioned I liked once, or the passed-down family recipes ever-present on our table.

Growing up in a family of OFWs meant twice the celebrations, and crabs, for our family, always signified that my dad was home.

We said "I love you" through our hands that prepared it and graciously accepted it through our stomachs. Through every single one of these holiday celebrations, three things always remained present: my Papa, my favorite boiled crabs, and a noisy house filled with my extended family. Nowadays, however, occasions look a little different.

Every first of November, individuals flock towards their loved ones' final resting place — to remember, mourn and simply linger in their grief. Amidst the sea of curated bouquets and candle-lit columbary, I stand with a petite cake and a birthday candle, singing softly in front of my Papa. On such a solemn day, I choose to celebrate his birth rather than his departure.

I lost my father a little over a week after my 14th birthday. I often mourned the loss of the years I could have had with him; memories I could have made alongside memories I struggle to remember. My father spent most of his life working overseas, dedicating his life to providing and earning. I only had the privilege to spend a total of four weeks with him every year, since he made it a point to reserve at least two weeks every July just to celebrate my birthday with me.

Years after he has passed, I desperately try to hold on to the memories I can recall and every little detail I can wrack up — even the most mundane things, such as words, gestures and habits he did daily. He would often blast music through his huge speakers in our *sala*, classics by Swing Out Sister, Chaka Khan, Earth, Wind & Fire, and even Beyoncé. Or how his arrival always came hand-in-hand with the distinct squeak of his rubber shoes hitting the marble floor. And whenever he was home, he would always cook my favorite dishes — one of which is boiled crabs. Rather than eat, my father would dedicate his time to tediously picking apart crabs for me, delicately searching every nook and cranny of its legs and claws, ensuring that I'd get every meaty piece. He would repeat the process again and again until I was full and happy. Only then would he start the process once more, finally taking a bite for himself.

As a teen coping with such an incomprehensible loss, I perceived grief as a solitary thing. One that is mine, perhaps with the misguided idea that it would bring me closer to my Papa. It would be another thing that was just ours, a selfish venture that highlighted my desperation to hold onto him.

Last Nov. 1, after visiting Papa for his birthday, my partner and I decided to continue the celebration at the nearby Pancake House. It was the same one he used to take me to daily as a child, after school or when I showed him the many "Very Good" stamps I earned that day. We would sit at a table for two, ordering classic pancakes. The servers would hand over their coloring sheet and a tray of broken-down crayons. Dates like these were a staple with my Papa and me. When my partner and I walked in, a "Happy Birthday Pancakes" sign welcomed us as we slid into the booth. While browsing the menu, the soft hum of *After the Love Has Gone* by Earth, Wind & Fire engulfed the tiny space. I could not help but tear up; I'd like to think he was right there with us.

And perhaps the drive to immerse myself in his music, his hobbies, and his cooking is a byproduct of the ever-present anxiety of living a life without him, of having more years without him than I had with him. To learn how he lived and to like what he was fond of is digging my nails into any piece of him that I could find in the scraps of people's memories, in details found in carelessly thrown around conversations, or stories told over the holidays when everyone is drunk on nostalgia and sheer joy.

I went to Sharjah a week ago to attend a work event, where a fraction of my extended family also resides. I was welcomed by my cousin and his wife, who had both just ended their work shifts, with big smiles on their faces and a "Welcome to Dubai" sign. I spent what little time I had exploring the city with my little nephew, listening to him excitedly ramble about the place he now calls home. From double-decker buses to the metro, he made it a point to muster up any information he could, then he looked up at me and waited for an enthusiastic response in return. On my last day, they prepared a meal for me: an improved version of my favorite boiled crab recipe with Cajun sauce, shrimp and corn.

Crabs have always signified a celebration. It's present at birthdays, homecomings, and most especially the holidays. It always signified that my dad was home, that the person we were supposed to be celebrating celebrated us instead, basking in the presence of their loved ones. He redirected the love he was supposed to be receiving to those he was coming home to. Even in the form of a simple meal, my dad never faltered in showing his love. It was in every laborious crack, extraction and offering chants: "I love you, I'm glad that you are full." A simple meal shared exudes a remembrance, grief laced with much love and fondness. Every bite reminds me of home, of family, and of a selfless love only a father can give.